DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 006 FL 027 156

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TITLE	Tanacross Practical Orthography.
INSTITUTION	Alaska Univ., Fairbanks. Alaska Native Language Center.
PUB DATE	2000-08-00
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.uaf.edu/amlc/langs/papers/practical.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Alaska Natives; *American Indian Languages; *Language Maintenance; *Phonology; *Tone Languages; Uncommonly Taught Languages; Vowels
IDENTIFIERS	Fricatives; Glottal Stops; *Orthography

ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the development of the Tanacross practical orthography, highlighting the crucial differences between practical and technical orthography used in some linguistic publications. Three stages of Tanacross orthography are exemplified in research from the 1980s. A fourth stage is a hybrid of the second and third stages, incorporating the vowel system and tri-graph dental affricates of the third stage but without distinguishing semi-voiced fricatives with underscore. A fifth stage, exemplified in publications of the Yukon Native Language Centre, adds five types of vowel tone markings. This system recognizes three distinctions in fricative voicing. The vowel system uses five vowel symbols to represent six phonemic vowels. Each vowel symbol may occur alone or in a sequence of identical symbols. Tone is marked on vowels using a diacritic. Low tone syllables are not marked for tone. Only the first of a sequence of orthographic vowels is marked for tone. Nasalization is marked with the Americanist nasal hook. Both vowels of a vowel sequence are marked with the nasal hook if the vowel is nasalized. Glottal stop is not written in word-initial position. Words spelled with an initial vowel actually begin with a glottal stop. (SM)

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ED 462 006

Tanacross practical orthography

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August 2000

As of this writing there are not many written materials available in the Tanacross language. However, an orthographic standard has developed over the past decade, largely through the work of the John Ritter of the Yukon Native Language Centre (YNLC), and more materials are likely to appear in the coming years. In this article I summarize the development of the Tanacross practical orthography and provide a guide to the crucial differences between the practical orthography and the technical orthography used in some linguistic publications. It is hoped that this discussion will aid speakers and linguists wishing to access existing and future publications in the Tanacross language.

Many different practical orthographies have been used to write Tanacross in pedagogical and linguistic publications. Leer (1982) recognizes three distinct phases of Tanacross orthography. The first stage is exemplified by Nancy McRoy's work in the early 1970's (cf. McRoy 1973). The second stage is exemplified in the work of Ron Scollon later in the same decade (Scollon 1979; Paul 1980). The third stage is exemplified by Leer's work with Alice Brean in the early 1980's. The system employed in Kari's work can be said to represent a fourth stage chronologically, though it is in many ways a hybrid of the second and third stages (Kari 1991b, 1991a). Kari's system incorporates the vowel system and tri-graph dental affricates (*tth* and *ddh*) of the third stage but does not distinguish semi-voiced fricatives with underscore. A fifth stage of Tanacross orthography is exemplified by publications of the Yukon Native Language Centre (Solomon 1994, 1996; Isaac 1997). The YNLC orthography incorporates the stage three changes and adds five types of vowel tone marking. This system is employed in most current Tanacross work, including that presented in this document. The consonant chart is shown below.

Table 1: Tanacross practical orthography (after Solomon 1996)

Stops/ Affricates	(b)	d t t'	dl tl tl'	ddh tth tth'	dz ts ts'	j ch ch'	g k k'	'
Fricatives			l ł ɬ	dh th th	z s s	 sh sh	gh x x	h
Nasals	m (mb)	n nh nd						
Approximants	w					y yh		

With respect to the fricatives, three distinctions in fricative voicing are recognized. Semi-voiced fricatives (necessarily restricted to stem-initial position) are marked with an underscore to

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indicate that their pronunciation in this position differs from that of a fully voiced or voiceless fricative. In fact, as discussed in above, these semi-voiced fricatives are actually conditioned allophones of the voiced fricatives, with the exception of the underlyingly voiced palatal fricative, which always occurs semi-voiced. However, these semi-voiced fricatives are very striking and clear to native speakers, and writing them as distinct segments captures an important and unique feature of the Tanacross sound system (John Ritter, p.c.). The YNLC orthography also recognizes /w/ as a distinct segment from its allophone /m/.

The vowel system of the YNLC orthography is shown in the table below. Five vowel symbols are used to represent six phonemic vowels. Each of five vowel symbols may occur either alone or in a sequence of identical symbols. (Diphthongs are represented as nuclear vowels followed by the approximant <*y*>, as in <*ey*> /ei/.)

Table 2: Tanacross practical orthography -- vowels

ii		uu	i	u
	ee	oo	e	o
	aa		a	

Sequences of identical vowel symbols usually represent long vowels, but not always. The mid-front vowel /e/ is represented orthographically as <ee>; the lower mid-front vowel /ɛ/ is represented by <e>. For the other vowels the length distinction is in many cases not phonemic. For example, vowels in open stem syllables are almost always long, so there is usually no possibility of a length contrast in this position. Where length is not phonemic, there is a great deal of variation among literate speakers as to the way vowel length is written. In such cases, there is a customary tendency to write stem vowels double and prefix vowels single. Often this distinction is lexicalized. For example, there is no length contrast in mid-back vowels in closed stems, yet we write <shos> 'bear' and <ganhook> 'dancing stick'.

There is in general no difference in quality between the double and single vowels <*uu*> and <*u*> or between <*oo*> and <*o*>. Each of these vowels is pronounced similar to its cardinal phonetic value. The vowel <*u*> represents a high back round vowel. The vowel <*o*> represents a mid-high back round vowel, somewhat higher than its cardinal value. The doubled version of these symbols have identical phonetic values to their single counterparts. In contrast, the single vowel <*i*> varies quite a bit in height, ranging from a high front vowel to a mid-high front vowel. Thus compare:

(1) Phonetic realizations of <*i*>

<shtthí'>	[ʃtθʰiʔ]	'my head'
<xdéltth'ih>	[xtɛ́ltθ'ih]	'they're sitting'
<sínt'eh>	[sɪnt'eh]	'he/she is'
<ihtsax>	[ʔihtsʰax]	'I'm crying'

As noted above, the distinction between double <*ee*> and single <*e*> almost always corresponds to a quality difference in addition to a potential quantity difference. For example,

(2) Phonetic realizations of <*e*> and <*ee*>

<seek>	[seːk]	'saliva'
<-s̲ék>	[-ʂɛ́k]	'torso'

The vowel <aa> represents a low central unrounded vowel. Its single counterpart <a> may be phonetically identical to <aa> but is also used to represent an allophone of short <e> which occurs before velar fricatives. Thus the vowels in <sén'> and <sáx> are spelled differently even though they are both underlyingly the same phonemic vowel.

Tone is marked on vowels using a diacritic. Low tone syllables are not marked for tone. Only the first of a sequence of orthographic vowels is marked for tone (in contrast to Navajo). Low tone is unmarked. Extra-high tone is marked with a double acute accent.

(3) Tone markings

v	low tone (unmarked)
v́	high tone
v̂	falling tone
v̌	rising tone
v̋	extra-high tone

Nasalization is marked using the Americanist nasal hook. Both vowels of a vowel sequence are marked with the nasal hook if the vowel is nasalized, e.g., <šnąą> 'my mother'.

Glottal stop is not written in word-initial position. Words spelled with an initial vowel actually begin with a glottal stop. To distinguish words which phonetically begin with a vowel, an appropriate sonorant is written preceding the vowel. Thus <yi> for initial /i/ and <wu> for initial /u/. A hyphen is used to distinguish ejective consonants from sequences of pulmonic stop plus glottal stop. Thus /nɛkʔẹh/ 'I'm looking' is written as <nek-'ẹh>.

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